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Svetlana Lokhova: I'm a mum under siege, not Mata Hari

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[Tony Allen-Mills](#)

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Svetlana Lokhova says she is a writer, not a spy — ‘people need to be able to differentiate’

VALENTINE VERMEIL/REA

“I can’t deny I’m a Russian,” says Svetlana Lokhova, whose name rather gives the game away. “And I can’t deny I’m a woman.” That, too, is indisputable, given that she is sitting in front of me with her shirt tucked up while she breastfeeds her baby. We are sitting in a bland hotel room in a city she has asked me not to name because there is a lot more to Lokhova than being a Russian-born mother.

She first made headlines in 2015 as a high-flying London banker who won more than £3m in a sexual harassment and discrimination case after male colleagues vindictively smeared her as “crazy Miss Cokehead” and “Miss Bonkers”.

She has since developed a second career as a brilliant researcher at Cambridge University, who is about to publish a startling book on a previously undetected network of Soviet spies that infiltrated American universities in the early 1930s. She is only 37 and should be looking forward to an academic future filled with promise, prizes and prestige.

Instead she has fled her London home for the sanctuary of a friend’s house 600 miles away. She has somehow become, according to which newspaper you read, the key to the US investigation into Donald Trump’s supposed collusion with Vladimir Putin; and a serial seducer of both American and British spymasters: when Trump complains that his enemies have launched a witch-hunt against him, Lokhova is the leading candidate for the witch.

“I’m not just accused of being a spy, but I’m also accused of sleeping with all these powerful men,” she says wearily. “I’m trying to laugh it off, but it’s hugely upsetting.” As her baby disengages from her breast and crawls off to investigate my briefcase, Lokhova embarks on what will eventually become a five-hour seminar on the multiple perils of being an attractive woman who also happens to be an expert on the history of Russian spying.

“I’m an author, not a practitioner of intelligence,” she sighs. “Sir Alec Guinness is not a spy just because he played George Smiley [the John le Carré character]. People need to be able to differentiate.”

It all started with a mildly naughty postcard, and one of those discreet Cambridge dinners that guests are not supposed to talk about, where contacts are made, ideas exchanged and bright young things are put through their paces for the benefit of visiting grandees.

On this occasion, in February 2014, the dinner was hosted by Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of MI6 and then master of Pembroke College. Also present was Professor Christopher Andrew, the official historian of MI5 and chairman of the Cambridge Intelligence Seminar, a forum for what it describes as “innovative intelligence research”.

In short, this was the nearest Britain gets to a master-spy masterclass. The visiting grandee that night was General Michael Flynn, then head of the Pentagon’s Defence Intelligence Agency, and later to become Trump’s short-lived pick as the US national security adviser. The brightest of the Cambridge young things, invited along to dazzle the guests with a sample of her path-breaking intelligence research, was Lokhova, then one of Andrew’s graduate students.

“I didn’t want to go to the dinner,” she recalls. “They were forever having important guests and I was busy working on MI5 files at the National Archives in Kew. But Chris Andrew needed a Russian expert and I was selected because of my knowledge and understanding of Russian intelligence history.”

At the time, one of the themes she was pursuing was Joseph Stalin's links to the intelligence world, as both an early victim of tsarist surveillance and as the ruthless patron of Soviet spying. She had unearthed a minor but intriguing document from a gloomy Moscow archive, and this she decided to show Flynn.

"I don't normally go around Cambridge dinners showing dirty postcards," she jokes. But here was a picture of a white marble statue, apparently from a Berlin museum, of two near-naked figures embracing. On the reverse, a 33-year-old Stalin had written an intriguing message to a 16-year-old girl he knew and evidently admired. It read in Russian, in part: "I give you a kiss back, and not just a simple kiss, but a hottttttttt [sic] one (because there is no point kissing any other way)."

The document showed a human side to Stalin that may well have been new to Flynn — just the kind of intellectual trick that Cambridge loves to show off to visitors. Yet Lokhova never dreamt that her offer of a mildly spicy anecdote would eventually become exhibit A among allegations that she had set out to seduce Flynn, supposedly with a view to blackmailing him or otherwise recruiting him as a Russian asset at the top of the US intelligence establishment. Could the Cambridge expert on Russian intelligence conceivably be a Russian spy?

The woman who finds herself trapped at the centre of a sexual, political and potentially criminal scandal was 10 years old when the curtain came down on Soviet-style communism. She remembers the Moscow of her childhood as a poor, grim, menacing city. "They were horrid times for Russians," she says.

Yet soon she was able to acquire her first pair of jeans (from the Salvation Army) and remembers "drinking Coca-Cola while walking in the street. It was absolutely brilliant. I found myself in a brave new world, and I embraced it."

At 18, with the help of the British Council, she applied for a place to read education and history at Cambridge. Even though her English was at that point sketchy, she was accepted and had to embark on intensive language lessons. She thought she might become a teacher. "I had become a huge admirer of Britain. I wanted to get out of Russia, I wanted a future and the future was in the West."

It was in the early 2000s that she attended a lecture by Andrew entitled "The Secret World". She says: "He was talking about Kim Philby [the Cambridge traitor] having sex in the snow with his Russian handler. Of course we all signed up for his course."

It was Andrew who encouraged her to approach some then recently opened Russian archives. An academic career beckoned, except that the newly minted graduate from a not excessively loaded Russian family decided she needed a summer job to help pay for her photocopying of thousands of archive documents. It took about 10 minutes for her new bosses at Morgan Stanley to spot her potential; she was offered a full-time job "because you are the kind of person who will never cry on the trading floor".

Within a few years she had swapped jobs and was earning £750,000 a year as an analyst at Sberbank CIB (UK), a Russian bank with offices in Fleet Street. Her banking career ended horribly in a sexual discrimination morass that culminated with a judge chastising Sberbank for attempting to smear her with bogus allegations of drug abuse — “a deliberate, planned and unnecessary misuse of these proceedings”. Most of her £3.2m award was earmarked for lawyers’ fees.

She had remained in contact with Andrew, who encouraged her to resume her research. “It was very therapeutic for me to return to full-time research as a distraction from the horrors I was going through in the court system,” she says. She is now a British citizen and an archives-by-fellow (a kind of junior fellow) of Churchill College, Cambridge. “I owe everything I’ve achieved to this country,” she says quietly. “I just don’t understand how I’ve become the enemy.”

When Flynn was forced to resign from the White House last year after only 24 days in office — sparking an avalanche of conspiracy theories about Trump’s connections with Russia — Lokhova found herself under siege. It started with an email from The Wall Street Journal, asking her to comment on “your relationship with Mike Flynn”. She grimaces: “I’m saying, like, what relationship?”



Halper: 'unreconstructed Russia hater'

After that Cambridge dinner, she tells me, Flynn was “whisked away by his security detail”. Yet she quickly learnt from the journalists pursuing her that another American present at the dinner was disputing her account. Stefan Halper, 73, a former White House official in several Republican administrations, is a life fellow at Magdalene College, Cambridge, and until recently was a prominent participant in the intelligence seminars. “Halper told reporters he had seen me leaving the dinner with Flynn,” Lokhova claims.

Halper, a foreign policy specialist and wealthy former banker, has since been widely named in US media as the FBI informant who infiltrated Trump’s presidential campaign and reported back on its links with Russia. Although Halper is a lifelong Republican, Lokhova describes him as “an unreconstructed Cold War Russia hater” who appears to have become alarmed by the Trump campaign’s willingness to deal with Moscow. Halper’s whereabouts are unknown and he has not commented on any of the reports of his alleged activities.

As my afternoon with Lokhova unfolded, it quickly became clear that she regards herself as “collateral damage” in the rush to pin something fatal on Trump. She blames Halper for dragging her into the collusion affair to the point where she is beginning to despair that she can extricate herself undamaged. She was a Russian woman with a saucy postcard at a dinner with a general who was close to Trump. “That clearly makes me a criminal,” she says bitterly.

Of Halper, she adds: “He’s a big man, quite sweaty, and very, very unpleasant. He would come to my lectures, spread himself out in the front row, then fall asleep, snoring loudly. I avoided him like the plague because he was rude all the time. I had to be polite because he was a senior figure at the university with a lot of money [to fund research]. We had to take it, but his behaviour was very disconcerting.”

Lokhova believes that malevolent tips originating from Halper were behind a series of news reports that raised questions about her ability to access Russian intelligence archives and exaggerated the extent of her contacts with Flynn.

The Guardian wrote of her “trusted access to Russian spy agency records” and quoted one Russian historian as claiming that “getting into the actual GRU [Russian military intelligence] archive is basically impossible”. When Lokhova complained at the implication she must have had insider access to Russian intelligence, The Guardian published a “clarification”, noting that “there is no suggestion that Lokhova has ever worked with or for any of the Russian intelligence agencies”.

She tells me she knows that Soviet intelligence files “will never be declassified”, but she spent “a very long time” in other communist-era archives. “Bloody awful places, cold, no electricity, they won’t allow you to wear a coat. My book was born of years of going through every bit of paper, I’m just the first person who was able through luck and persistence to get to material describing Soviet intelligence.”

She found some of her material in the Mitrokhin Archive — the handwritten notes of a KGB defector — stored at Churchill College. Her new book, *The Spy Who Changed History*, tells the largely unknown story of Stanislav Shumovsky, who was dispatched to New York by Stalin in 1931 on a mission to acquire the technology secrets that enabled Russia to build the Tupolev Tu-4 — the strategic bomber that by 1949 gave Moscow the nuclear strike force it needed to counter the US atomic arsenal.

She should be preparing a big publicity push for her book; instead she is closeted away, begging me not to publish the name of her baby, the name of her partner, or anything else that might lead the American media to her door. When her name was first linked to Flynn, she says, a couple of US reporters told her: “‘We’re not after you, we want to get Flynn.’ So why should my name be plastered across the newspapers?”

That was just the beginning. As the Russia collusion storm gathered pace, she was widely reported to have received emails from Flynn signed “General Misha” (the Russian nickname for Michael; “He never called himself General Misha,” Lokhova says); she supposedly sat next to him at the Cambridge dinner (“Look at the photos. I was sat quite far from him”); Flynn invited her to Russia (“He never invited me to Russia”); and, of course, they were having an affair.

The New York Times and The Washington Post both sent crack reporters to investigate; according to Lokhova, both decided not to publish the wildest allegations because they could not find a second source. Social media dispensed with legal and factual niceties: she was widely portrayed online as a Russian “honeypot” in Putin’s pay — a Mata Hari for the modern age.

“They were throwing all sorts of things at me — love, sex, money. Obviously, I reject them all,” she says. “I just want to add that I’ve never been interviewed by any authorities and clearly if there were any doubts about who I am and what I do, I would have been [interrogated]. I should be able to go on with my research without having my life turned upside down. Instead I’m still having to explain myself, while Halper is in hiding.”

She has made formal complaints about Halper’s behaviour to Magdalene College and to her constituency MP, and has written to Theresa May. “Either I’m a Russian spy and there are genuine concerns, or Halper is crazy and a liar,” she says.

The lessons from Lokhova’s experience are obvious. If you become involved in the intelligence world, don’t be a Russian, don’t be a woman and don’t be clever. You will become a sitting duck for fantasists and misogynists and both friends and foes of Trump.

What worries Lokhova is that genuine concerns about Russian state attempts to undermine the West will be poorly served by hoary old clichés about Mata Haris and dirty postcards. “The ridiculous allegations against me make a mockery out of any serious Russian investigation,” she says.

She hopes that her new book will establish her credentials as a serious historian. “My interest is in the past, not the present,” she says. “I hide in the past.”



Stalin's postcard, with its risqué note, was shown to Michael Flynn

A nightmare sparked by Stalin's saucy postcard

Svetlana Lokhova's troubles stem from an erotic card sent in 1912 by a 33-year-old Joseph Stalin to a 16-year-old girl. Lokhova showed it to General Mike Flynn at Cambridge University in 2014. "I don't normally go around Cambridge dinners showing dirty postcards," she says. Flynn, who became Donald Trump's national security adviser for 24 days last year, was forced from office for lying to the FBI over contacts he had with Russia.

The Spy Who Changed History by Svetlana Lokhova will be published by William Collins on June 14 at £20